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SUBJECT: BOUTERSE'S NDP PARTY TURNS UP THE PRESSURE

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REFTELS: (A) PARAMARIBO 39 (B) PARAMARIBO 43 (C) 05
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1. (SBU) Summary. Surinamese politics has become increasingly rancorous. The opposition National Democratic Party (NDP) is systematically working to exploit unpopular decisions taken by the government, with the goal of undermining a fragile coalition to provoke new elections. A recent chaotic National Assembly (DNA) session where police had to remove four NDP members for misconduct and the aggressive and unsuccessful NDP push to place Bouterse on the Defense Committee stand as examples of provocation. With the ruling coalition struggling to connect with the public, this political drama looks likely to continue. Some observers believe that it is designed to provoke unrest and therefore forestall the upcoming trial of Bouterse for the murder of 15 opposition members in December 1982. End Summary.

CHAOS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

2. (U) Tensions between governing New Front Plus and the NDP-led opposition in the DNA reached a boiling point on February 9 when the session disintegrated into a shouting match over how the government is dealing with hundreds of recently closed down street vendors and its handling of electricity in the district of Nickerie, where rolling black-outs were briefly in effect. DNA speaker Paul Somohardjo ordered police to remove five opposition parliamentarians from the session marred by threats, accusations, and the loud banging of name placards. In a noteworthy moment, A-Combination leader, convicted narcotics trafficker, and former rebel leader Ronnie Brunswijk threatened to throw out a disruptive opposition parliamentarian himself if the member did not leave.

3. (U) During the same session, NDP parliamentarian Rashied Doekhie sought to play the corruption card, effectively accusing prominent New Front DNA member and former Deputy Speaker Ruth Wijdenbosch of stealing 28,000 SRD (10,000 USD) from the government when she was overpaid as policy adviser at the Ministry of Finance. Wijdenbosch, prepared by advance warning of Doekhie's attack, admitted the erroneous salary overpayment, but said she is paying it back in installments.

14. (U) In mid-January, police began forcibly removing the stands of unlicensed street vendors as part of a reordering of downtown Paramaribo. The media highlighted vendors' protests for 10 straight days. Despite a variety of proposed solutions, discussions between the enraged vendors and the government are at an impasse. Seeing a political opening, the NDP took up the mantle of the vendors and framed the issue as an inconsiderate, out-of-touch government acting against the average, low-income Surinamer's interests. The opportunity repeated itself when students in Nickerie protested rolling electricity outages caused by cash shortfalls at the national electricity company.

BOUTERSE DENIED SEAT ON DEFENSE COMMITTEE, UPROAR ENSUES

15. (U) The NDP's aggressive attempts to place Bouterse on the parliamentary Defense Committee was a provocative ploy considering Bouterse's past as a coup leader and military strongman. The New Front blocked Bouterse from joining the Defense Committee in 2000 and on January 19 the New Front Plus used its majority in the DNA to once again vote down Bouterse's committee membership. Opposition members boycotted the vote, calling it an outrage; Bouterse threatened that nobody from the Defense Committee would be able to set foot on a military base if he were denied a seat on the Committee. On January 31 the same DNA majority also stopped Bouterse from serving on an ad hoc Defense Budget Committee.

16. (U) In protest of the vote, the NDP announced its withdrawal from all permanent DNA committees and is pressing other opposition parties to do the same. The procedural consequences of the NDP decision are still unclear. While the committees should vet legislation before its presentation to the full assembly, they have not

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traditionally played a strong role. According to parliamentary protocol, committees should consist of four majority and three opposition members. DNA speaker Paul Somohardjo said he expects business to move forward as usual, while NDP leaders predict serious disruptions.

17. (SBU) Bouterse has publicly reasserted his desire to sit on the Defense Committee, claiming there is nobody better qualified. He said that anybody with an understanding of democracy understands that the vote was a joke and promised a "political response." In an apparent explanation of his consistent absenteeism, Bouterse undercut his own campaign to serve by saying that only chitchat and games occur in the DNA, in which he has no interest.

POLITICAL DRAMA LINKED TO THE DECEMBER MURDER TRIALS

18. (SBU) The latest political dramas provoked by Bouterse and his NDP party occur against the backdrop of Bouterse's possible prosecution for the murder of 15 prominent Surinamers opposed to his military rule in December 1982. The military court is still deliberating on pre-trial defense objections heard last fall.

19. (U) While the Government of Suriname appears committed to proceeding with the trial despite the risks, a recent opinion poll revealed a public largely at odds with this decision. IDOS, a respected independent polling group affiliated with the university, carried out a poll in Paramaribo, home to roughly half of Suriname's population, in the first week of January. Only one-third of all respondents favored a criminal trial. One-third favored a truth commission, which was publicly called for by former Minister of Defense Ronald Assen in January, while a third

felt the issue should be simply laid to rest given the lengthy time that had elapsed.

¶10. (SBU) The NDP's strategic attempts to exploit unpopular decisions made by the government appear to be taking their toll. The poll also showed increased popular support for Bouterse's NDP at the expense of President Venetiaan's New Front Plus, with 9 percent of New Front voters declaring themselves prepared to swing to the NDP if an election were held today. A full 62 percent of respondents disapprove of the President and his cabinet and 78 percent characterize Venetiaan's policy as vague and unclear. (See septel for complete poll results).

¶11. (SBU) Since doubling its DNA seats in the May 2005 election, the NDP has ratcheted up its criticism of the government and worked hard to unite its fellow opposition parties to strengthen its hand. In addition to the above-mentioned situation of street vendors and energy shortages, the NDP has also used hikes in gasoline prices to criticize the government. (See ref C). While the NDP exploits sometimes fizzle, such as failed street protests in October and November, the party's efforts to address everyday issues and problems can still resonate with average voters.

¶12. (SBU) According to an influential weekly editorial page which questioned Bouterse's devotion to democracy, the NDP's end game is to use these issues to create enough dissatisfaction to force an early election (despite the lack of a clear constitutional mechanism to do so). The editorial made the point that although the next election is scheduled for 2010, with NDP chairman Bouterse likely facing a murder trial before then, the NDP is very eager to see early elections.

¶13. (SBU) It is unlikely that the political polarization will end soon. The NDP-led opposition has said that the government has until February 14 to develop satisfactory solutions to the street vendor issue and energy problems in Nickerie or it will once again face serious disruptions during the next session. There are also reports that the vendors are planning street protests on February 14 with support from the NDP. The government, meanwhile, has failed to reach out to the public to articulate a vision for the future. One Minister complained to the Ambassador about the government's inability to mount an effective information campaign to tout macroeconomic improvements.

COMMENT

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¶14. (SBU) The NDP's political gambits appear to be part a concerted and aggressive campaign to undermine the fragile majority of the New Front Plus, force new elections and form a government. In the context of the upcoming December murder trial, NDP political actions can be seen as an extension of party chair Bouterse's suspected efforts to create a critical mass of unrest and instability in order to force the government to end his criminal trial. The GOS has given the NDP an advantageous environment in which to operate as the government's popularity is suffering from its apparent inability to articulate and justify its policies and decisions. The arrogance and isolation exhibited by New Front leadership indicates their continued failure to internalize last year's election, in which they lost ten seats and their majority, as a major defeat.

BARNES